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VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEES:
HEALTH
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

March 26, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor
State of New York
Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Governor Cuomo:

Firstly, I want to thank you for surging much-needed resources into New York State to support our testing, treatment, and healthcare needs during this coronavirus epidemic. As your administration seeks out additional federal options to expand hospital capacity, I suggest requesting from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that VA medical facilities in the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System (VA NYHHS) have referral relationships to civilian hospitals as the spread of coronavirus increases in New York City. Specifically, we must utilize the Brooklyn VA Medical Center (VAMC) and the Manhattan VAMC for COVID-19 patients only, while using the USNS Comfort for the treatment of non-COVID-19 veteran patient treatment, among other things. In doing so, we must ensure that veteran patients continue to receive priority, and cap all referral levels to keep our VA facilities from being overwhelmed.

As COVID-19 testing ramps up on Staten Island, the Brooklyn VAMC, the backbone of the VA NYHHS, is well-positioned to handle inpatient COVID-19 overflow. The demands on Staten Island University Hospital, Richmond University Medical Center, Maimonides Medical Center, and Coney Island Hospital are too great, and the Brooklyn VAMC is already being utilized by VA to handle an increased population of COVID-19-positive patients. Currently, all New York City veterans who receive care through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and need to be hospitalized for COVID-19 will be routed to the Brooklyn VAMC. These veterans must absolutely remain priority one. But we know that with the capacity to handle a surge in the number of hospital beds, negative pressure rooms, and medical staff, the Brooklyn VAMC is well-positioned to serve as a lifeline to our local hospitals who need it. This does not mean that the Brooklyn VAMC is infallible--there must be referral caps in place to ensure that our VA system can continue to serve the city's veterans, even through this epidemic.

We must also remember what happens in one borough, impacts the other four. Our public and private hospitals in Manhattan will also need assistance with the overflow of COVID-19 patients, and civilian hospitals should also be able to create a referral relationship and refer patients to the Manhattan VAMC for inpatient COVID-19 care.

As a combat veteran, suggesting to open up the VA to civilian patients is not something I take lightly, but the fact is if we do not use every resource we have available to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic now, then the VA will be unable to solely serve veterans for the foreseeable future. However, the VA cannot stem the tide of this pandemic alone--it is essential that we utilize our military community to ensure that non-COVID-19 patients, and particularly our elderly veterans, are cared for. I encourage you to build a system to direct non-COVID-19 veterans and civilian patients to the USNS Comfort, the naval ship we called on to support New York City's healthcare system, for both inpatient and outpatient care. The Comfort contains 12 fully-equipped operating rooms, 1,000 hospital beds, laboratory facilities, and an oxygen-producing plant. Ensuring proper quarantining measures and keeping COVID-19-negative patients safe should be a priority--the USNS Comfort can help us to achieve that goal.

I am heartened by your deep commitment to our city's wellbeing in this time of crisis, and sincerely hope that you give these recommendations due consideration. Our VA and military agencies have a role to play in this recovery effort, and must be utilized before it's too late. I look forward to working with you and your administration on this effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael A. Miller", followed by a long horizontal line.

CC:

The Honorable Bill de Blasio, Mayor, City of New York